

Remarks at a Meeting of the National Governors Association
February 25, 2013

Thank you, guys. Please have a seat. Well, welcome, everybody. Thanks for being here.

We all have a lot on our plate, everything from our immigration system to our education system. As Joe talked about, our goal is to make sure that we can be an effective partner with you.

I want to thank the members of my Cabinet who are here, and members of the administration. I want to thank Jack and Mary for their leadership of the NGA. And, everybody else, I just want to say thanks to you for being on your best behavior last night. *[Laughter]* I'm told nothing was broken. No silverware is missing. *[Laughter]* I didn't get any calls from the neighbors about the noise, although I can't speak for Joe's after-party at the Observatory. I hear that was wild. *[Laughter]*

Now, I always enjoy this weekend when I have a chance to see the Governors. As leaders, we share responsibility to do whatever we can to help grow our economy and create good middle class jobs and open up new doors of opportunity for all of our people. That's our true north, our highest priority. And it's got to guide every decision that we make at every level.

As I've said, we should be asking ourselves three questions every single day: How do we make America a magnet for good jobs? How do we equip our people with the skills and the training to get those jobs? And how do we make sure if they get those jobs that their hard work actually pays off?

As Governors, you're the ones who are on the ground, seeing firsthand every single day what works, what doesn't work, and that's what makes you so indispensable. Whatever your party, you ran for office to do everything that you could to make our folks' lives better. And one thing I know unites all of us and all of you—Democrats and Republicans—and that is the last thing you want to see is Washington get in the way of progress.

Unfortunately, in just 4 days, Congress is poised to allow a series of arbitrary, automatic budget cuts to kick in that will slow our economy, eliminate good jobs, and leave a lot of folks who are already pretty thinly stretched scrambling to figure out what to do.

This morning, you received a report outlining exactly how these cuts will harm middle class families in your States. Thousands of teachers and educators will be laid off. Tens of thousands of parents will have to deal with finding child care for their children. Hundreds of thousands of Americans will lose access to primary care and preventive care like flu vaccinations and cancer screenings. Tomorrow, for example, I'll be in the Tidewater region of Virginia, where workers will sit idle when they should be repairing ships, and a carrier sits idle when it should be deploying to the Persian Gulf.

Now, these impacts will not all be felt on day one. But rest assured, the uncertainty is already having an effect. Companies are preparing layoff notices. Families are preparing to cut back on expenses. And the longer these cuts are in place, the bigger the impact will become.

So while you are in town, I hope that you speak with your congressional delegation and remind them in no uncertain terms exactly what is at stake and exactly who is at risk. Because here's the thing: These cuts do not have to happen. Congress can turn them off any time with

just a little bit of compromise. To do so, Democrats like me need to acknowledge that we're going to have to make modest reforms in Medicare if we want the program there for future generations and if we hope to maintain our ability to invest in critical things like education, research, and infrastructure.

I've made that commitment. It's reflected in proposals I made last year and the year before that and will be reflected in my budget, and I stand by those commitments to make the reforms for smart spending cuts.

But we also need Republicans to adopt the same approach to tax reform that Speaker Boehner championed just 2 months ago. Under our concept of tax reform, nobody's rates would go up, but we'd be able to reduce the deficit by making some tough, smart spending cuts and getting rid of wasteful tax loopholes that benefit the well off and the well connected.

I know that sometimes folks in Congress think that compromise is a bad word. They figure they'll pay a higher price at the polls for working with the other side than they will for standing pat or engaging in obstructionism. But as Governors, some of you with legislatures controlled by the other party, you know that compromise is essential to getting things done. And so is prioritizing, making smart choices.

That's how Governor O'Malley in Maryland put his State on track to all but eliminate his deficit while keeping tuition down and making Maryland's public schools among the best in America 5 years running. That's how Governor Haslam balanced his budget last year in Tennessee while still investing in key areas like education for Tennessee's kids. Like the rest of us, they know we can't just cut our way to prosperity. Cutting alone is not an economic policy. We've got to make the tough, smart choices to cut what we don't need so that we can invest in the things that we do need.

Let me highlight two examples of what we do need. The first is infrastructure. This didn't used to be a partisan issue. I don't know when exactly that happened. It should be a no-brainer. Businesses are not going to set up shop in places where roads and bridges and ports and schools are falling apart. They're going to open their doors wherever they can connect the best transportation and communications networks to their businesses and to their customers.

And that's why I proposed what we're calling Fix-It-First—I talked about this in my State of the Union Address—to put people to work right now on urgent repairs, like the nearly 70,000 structurally deficient bridges across the country. And to make sure taxpayers don't shoulder the entire burden, I also proposed a partnership to rebuild America that attracts private capital to upgrade what our businesses need most: modern ports to move our goods, modern pipelines to withstand a storm, modern schools that are worthy of our children.

I know that some people in Congress reflexively oppose any idea that I put forward, even if it's an idea that they once supported, but rebuilding infrastructure is not my idea. It's everybody's idea. It's what built this country. Governor Kitzhaber, a Democrat in Oregon, has made clean energy infrastructure a top priority. Governor Brownback of Kansas, a Republican, has been fighting to upgrade water infrastructure there.

And folks who think spending really is our biggest problem should be more concerned than anybody about improving our infrastructure right now. We're talking about deferred maintenance here. We know we're going to have to spend the money. And the longer we wait, the more it's going to cost. That is a fact. I think Matt Mead, a Republican, put it pretty well in Wyoming's State of—State address. He said failing to maintain our roads "is not a plan for being fiscally conservative." Well, what's true in Wyoming is true all across the United States.

And we could be putting folks back to work right now. We know contractors are begging for work. They'll come in on time, under budget, which never happens. And we could make a whole lot of progress right now on things that we know we're going to have to do at some point. This is like fixing the roof or repairing a boiler that's broken. It will save us money in the long term.

I know that one of the biggest hurdles that you face when it comes to fixing infrastructure is redtape. And oftentimes, that comes out of Washington with regulations. In my first term, we started to take some steps to address that. And we've shaved months—in some cases, even years—off the timeline of infrastructure projects across America.

So today, I'm accelerating that effort. We're setting up regional teams that will focus on some of the unique needs each of you have in various parts of the country. We're going to help the Pacific Northwest move faster on renewable energy projects. We're going to help the Northeast Corridor move faster on high-speed rail service. We're going to help the Midwest and other States like Colorado move faster on projects that help farmers deal with worsening drought. We're going to help States like North Dakota and South Dakota and Montana move faster on oil and gas production. All of these projects will get more Americans back to work faster. And we can do even more if we can get Congress to act.

The second priority that I want to talk about is education, and in particular, education that starts at the earliest age. I want to partner with each of you to make high-quality preschool available to every child in America.

Now, this is an area where we've already seen great bipartisan work at the State level. I was just in Governor Deal's State to highlight this issue because Georgia has made it a priority to educate our youngest kids. And in the school district where I visited in Decatur, Georgia, you're already seeing closing of the achievement gap. Kids who are poor are leveling up. And everybody is seeing real improvement, because it's high-quality, early childhood education.

Study after study shows that the sooner children begin to learn in these high-quality settings, the better he or she does down the road, and we all end up saving money. Unfortunately, today, fewer than 3 in 10 4-year-olds are enrolled in a high-quality preschool program. Most middle class parents can't afford a few hundred bucks a week in additional income for these kinds of preschool programs. And poor kids, who need it most, lack access. And that lack of access can shadow them for the rest of their lives. We all pay a price for that.

Every dollar we invest in early childhood education can save more than 7 dollars later on: boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing incidents of violent crime.

And again, I'm not the first person to focus on this. Governor Bentley has made this a priority in Alabama. Governor Snyder is making it a priority in Michigan. Governor Tomblin has made this a priority in West Virginia. Even in a time of tight budgets, Republicans and Democrats are focused on high-quality early childhood education. We want to make sure that we can be an effective partner in that process.

We should be able to do that for every child, everywhere—Democrat, Republican, blue State, red State—it shouldn't matter. All of us want our kids to grow up more likely to read and write and do math at grade level, to graduate high school, hold a job, and form more stable families of their own. That will be better for every State. That will be better for this country. That's what high-quality early childhood education can deliver. And I hope that you're willing to partner with us to make that happen.

Let me just close with this. There are always going to be areas where we have some genuine disagreement, here in Washington and in your respective States. But there are more areas where we can do a lot more cooperating than I think we've seen over the last several years. To do that, though, this town has to get past its obsession with focusing on the next election instead of the next generation.

All of us are elected officials. All of us are concerned about our politics, both in our own party's as well as the other party's. But at some point, we've got to do some governing. And certainly, what we can't do is keep careening from manufactured crisis to manufactured crisis. As I said in the State of the Union, the American people have worked hard and long to dig themselves out of one crisis; they don't need us creating another one. And unfortunately, that's what we've been seeing too much out there.

The American people are out there every single day, meeting their responsibilities, giving it their all to provide for their families and their communities. A lot of you are doing the same things in your respective States. Well, we need that same kind of attitude here in Washington. At the very least, the American people have a right to expect that from their representatives.

And so I look forward to working with all of you not just to strengthen our economy for the short term, but also to reignite what has always been the central premise of America's economic engine, and that is that we build a strong, growing, thriving middle class, where if you work hard in this country, no matter who you are, what you look like, you can make it; you can succeed. That's our goal, and I know that's the goal of all of you as well.

So I look forward to our partnering. And with that, what I want to do is clear out the press so we can take some questions. All right?

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:18 a.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Vice President Joe Biden; and Gov. Jack A. Markell of Delaware, in his capacity as chair, and Gov. Mary Fallin of Oklahoma, in her capacity as vice chair, National Governors Association. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Vice President Joe Biden.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : National Governors Association :: Meeting.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Bentley, Robert J.; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Boehner, John A.; Brownback, Sam D.; Deal, John N.; Fallin, Mary; Haslam, William E.; Kitzhaber, John A.; Markell, Jack A.; Mead, Matthew H.; O'Malley, Martin J.; Snyder, Rick; Tomblin, Earl R.

Subjects: Agriculture : Severe drought, relief efforts; Alabama : Governor; Budget, Federal : Deficit and national debt; Budget, Federal : Government programs, spending reductions; Congress : House of Representatives :: Speaker; Delaware : Governor; Economy, national : Economic concerns; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Early childhood education programs; Education : Postsecondary education :: Career training and continuing education; Education : School improvement and renovation; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: Promotion efforts; Energy : Domestic sources; Georgia : Governor; Governors Association, National; Health and medical care : Medicare and Medicaid; Kansas : Governor; Maryland : Governor; Michigan : Governor; Oklahoma : Governor; Oregon : Governor; Taxation : Tax Code, reform; Tennessee : Governor; Transportation : High-speed rail lines, development and

expansion; Transportation : Infrastructure, national, improvement efforts; West Virginia : Governor; White House Office : Vice President; Wyoming : Governor.

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